

# A Ridiculous Philosopher

EX LIBRIS UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA



JOHN HENRY NASH LIBRARY

◆ SAN FRANCISCO ◆

PRESENTED TO THE

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

ROBERT GORDON SPROUL, PRESIDENT.

◆ BY ◆

MR. AND MRS. MILTON S. RAY  
CECILY, VIRGINIA AND ROSALYN RAY

AND THE

RAY OIL BURNER COMPANY

SAN FRANCISCO  
NEW YORK

# "AMENITIES OF BOOK COLLECTING"



*Howard Chandler Christy*







William Gormin

# **A Ridiculous Philosopher**

**A. EDWARD NEWTON**  
**"OAK KNOLL"**  
**DAYLESFORD, PENNSYLVANIA**

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

*Copyright, 1913, by A. Edward Newton*

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
PUBLISHED BY THE  
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS



## A RIDICULOUS PHILOSOPHER

I am not sure that I know what philosophy is; a philosopher is one who practices it, and we have it on high authority that "there was never yet philosopher that could endure the toothache, patiently."

There is an old man in Wilkie Collins' novel, "The Moonstone," the best novel of its kind in the language, who, when in doubt, reads "Robinson Crusoe." In like manner I, when in doubt, turn to Boswell's "Life of Johnson," and there I read that the fine, crusty old doctor was hailed in the Strand one day by a man who half a century before had been at Pembroke College with him. It is not surprising that Johnson did not at first remember his former friend, and he was none too well pleased to be reminded that they were both "old men now." "We are, sir," said Dr. Johnson, "but don't let us discourage one another," and they began to talk over old times and compare notes as to where they stood in the world.

Edwards, his friend, had practiced law and had made money, but had spent or given much of it away. "I shall not die rich," said he. "But, sir," said Johnson, "it is better to live rich than to die rich." And now comes Edwards' immortal remark: "You are a philosopher, Dr. Johnson. I have tried, too, in my time to be a philosopher, but I don't know how; cheerfulness was always breaking in."

With the word "cheerfulness," Edwards had demolished the scheme of life of most of our professed

philosophers who have no place in their systems for the attribute that goes farthest toward making life worth while to the average man.

Cheerfulness is a much rarer quality than is generally supposed, especially among the rich. It was not common even before we learned that, in spite of Browning, though God may be in his heaven, nevertheless, all is wrong in the world.

If "most men lead lives of quiet desperation," as Thoreau says, it is, I suspect, because they will not allow cheerfulness to break in upon them when it will. A good disposition is worth a fortune. Give cheerfulness a chance and let the professed philosopher go hang.

But it is high time for me to turn my attention and yours, if I may, to the particular philosopher through whom I wish to stick my pen and, thus impaled, present him for your edification, say rather, amusement. His name, William Godwin, the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and the father-in-law of Shelley.

Godwin was born in Cambridgeshire in 1756, and came of preaching stock. It is related that when only a lad he used to steal away, not to go in swimming nor to rob an orchard, but to a meeting house to preach; this at the age of ten. The boy was father to the man; to the end of his life he never did anything else. He first preached orthodoxy, later heterodoxy, but he was always a preacher. I do not like the tribe. I am using the word as indicating one who elects to teach, by word, rather than by example.

When a boy he had an attack of smallpox. Religious scruples prevented him from submitting to vaccination,

for he said he had no wish to run counter to the will of God. In this frame of mind he did not long remain. He seems to have been a hard student—what we would call a grind. He read enormously and by twenty he considered that he was fully equipped for his life's work. He was as ready to preach as an Irishman is to fight, for the love of it; but he was quarrelsome as well as pious, and falling out with his congregation he dropped the title of Reverend and betook himself to literature and London.

At this time the French Revolution was raging, and the mental churning which it occasioned had its effect upon sounder minds than his. Godwin soon became intimate with Tom Paine and others of like opinions. Wherever political heresy and schism was talked, there Godwin was to be found. He stood for everything which was "advanced" in thought and conduct; he joined the school which was to write God with a small "g." All the radical visionaries in London were attracted to him and he to them. He thought and dreamed and talked, and finally grew to feel the need of a larger audience. The result was "An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice," a book which created a tremendous sensation in its day. It seemed the one thing needed to bring political dissent and dissatisfaction to a head.

Much was wrong at the time, much is still wrong, and doubtless reformers of Godwin's type do a certain amount of good. They call attention to abuses and eventually the world sets about to remedy them. A "movement" is in the air; it centers in some man who voices and directs it. For the moment the man and

the movement seem to be one. Ultimately the movement becomes diffused, its character changes; frequently the man originally identified with it is forgotten—so it was with Godwin.

“Political Justice” was published in 1793. In it Godwin fell foul of everything. He assailed all forms of government. The common idea that blood is thicker than water is wrong; all men are brothers, one should do for a stranger as for a brother. The distribution of property is absurd. A man’s needs are to be taken as the standard of what he should receive. He that needs most is to be given most—by whom Godwin did not say.

Marriage is a law and the worst of all laws; it is an affair of property, and like property must be abolished. The intercourse of the sexes is to be like any other species of friendship. If two men happen to feel a preference for the same woman, let them both enjoy her conversation and be wise enough to consider sexual intercourse “a very trivial object indeed.”

I have a copy of “Political Justice” before me with Tom Paine’s signature on the title page. What a whirlwind all this once created, especially with the young! Its author became one of the most talked of men of his time, and Godwin’s estimate of himself could not have been higher than that his disciples set upon him. Compared with him, “Paine was nowhere and Burke a flashy sophist.” He gloried in the reputation his book gave him and he profited by it to the extent of a thousand pounds—to him it was a fortune.

Pitt, who was then Prime Minister, when his attention was called to the book, wisely remarked “that it

was not worth while to prosecute the author of a three-guinea book because at such a price very little harm could be done to those who had not three shillings to spare."

The following year Godwin published his one other book that has escaped the rubbish heap of time, "The Adventures of Caleb Williams," a novel. It is the best of what might be called "The Nightmare Series," which would begin with "The Castle of Otranto," include his own daughter's "Frankenstein," and end, for the moment, with Bram Stoker's "Dracula." "Caleb Williams" has real merit; that it is horrible and unnatural may be at once admitted, but there is a vitality about it which holds your interest to the last; unrelieved by any flash of sentiment or humor, it is still as entirely readable as it was once immensely popular. Colman, the younger, dramatized it under the name of "The Iron Chest," and several generations of playgoers have shuddered at the character of Falkland, the murderer, who, and not Caleb Williams, is the chief character. His other novels are soup made out of the same stock, as a chef would say, with a dash of the supernatural added.

Godwin had now written all that he was ever to write on which the dust of years has not settled only to be disturbed by some curious student of a forgotten literature, yet he supposed that he was writing for posterity!

Meantime he, who had been living with his head in the clouds, became aware of the existence of "females." It was an important, if belated, discovery. Always an inveterate letter-writer his curious letters to a number

of women have been preserved. He seems to have had more than a passing fancy for Amelia Alderson, afterward Mrs. Opie, the wife of the artist. He was intimate with Mrs. Robinson, the "Perdita" of the period, in which part she had attracted the attention of the Prince of Wales. Mrs. Inchbald and Mrs. Reveley were also friends, with whom he had frequent misunderstandings. His views on the subject of marriage being well known, perhaps these ladies, merely to test the philosopher, sought to overcome his objection to "that worst of institutions." If so, their efforts were unsuccessful.

Godwin, however, seems to have exerted a peculiar fascination over the fair sex, and he finally met one with whom, as he says, "friendship melted into love." Godwin, saying he would ne'er consent, consented. Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of the "Rights of Woman," now calling herself Mrs. Imlay, triumphed. Her period of romance, followed fast by tragedy, was for a brief time renewed with Godwin. She had had one experience, the result of which was a fatherless infant daughter Fanny, and some time after she took up with Godwin she urged upon him the desirability of "marriage lines." Godwin demurred for a time, but when Mary confided to him that she was about to become a mother, a private wedding in St. Pancras Church took place. Separate residence was attempted in order to conform to Godwin's theory that too close familiarity might result in mutual weariness, but Godwin was not destined to become bored by his wife. She had intelligence and beauty; indeed it seems likely that he loved her as devotedly as it was possible for one of his frog-like

nature to do. Shortly after the marriage a daughter was born, christened Mary, and a few days later the remains of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin were interred in the old graveyard of St. Pancras, close by the church which she had recently left as a bride.

No sketch of Godwin's life would be complete without the well-known story of the expiring wife's exclamation: "I am in heaven," to which Godwin replied, "No, my dear, you only mean that your physical sensations are somewhat easier."

Thus by that "divinity that shapes our ends rough," Godwin, who did not approve of marriage and who had no place in his philosophy for the domestic virtues, became within a few months a husband, a widower, a step-father and a father. Probably no man was less well equipped than he for his immediate responsibilities. He had been living in one house and his wife in another to save his face, as it were, and also to avoid interruptions, but this scheme of life was no longer possible. A household must be established; some sort of a family nurse became an immediate necessity. One was secured who tried to marry Godwin out of hand—to escape her attentions he fled to Bath.

But his objections to marriage as an institution were waning, and when he met Harriet Lee, the daughter of an actor, and herself a writer of some small distinction, they were laid aside altogether. His courtship of Miss Lee took the form of interminable letters. He writes her, "It is not what you are but what you might be that charms me," and he chides her for not being prepared faithfully to discharge the duties of a wife and

mother. Few women have been in this humor won—Miss Lee was not among them.

Godwin finally returned to London. He was now a man approaching middle age, cold, methodical, dogmatic and quick to take offence. He began to live on borrowed money. The story of his life at this time is largely a story of his squabbles. A more industrious man at picking a quarrel one would go far to find, and that the record might remain he wrote letters—not short, angry letters, but long, serious, disputatious epistles, such as no one likes to receive and which seem to demand and usually get an immediate answer. Ritson writes him, “I wish you would make it convenient to return to me the thirty pounds I loaned you. My circumstances are by no means what they were at the time I advanced it, nor did I, in fact, imagine you would have retained it so long;” and again, “Though you have not the ability to repay the money I loaned you, you might have integrity enough to return the books you borrowed. I do not wish to bring against you a railing accusation, but am compelled, nevertheless, to feel that you have not acted the part of an honest man.”

Godwin seems to have known his weakness for he writes of himself, “I am feeble of tact and liable to the grossest mistakes respecting theory, taste and character;” and again, “No domestic connection is fit for me but that of a person who should habitually study my gratification and happiness.” This sounds ominous from one who was constantly looking for a “Female Companion.”



It is with a feeling of relief that we turn, for a moment, from the sordid life of Godwin the philosopher, to Godwin the dramatist. He was sadly in need of funds, and following the usual custom of an author in distress had written a tragedy, for which Charles Lamb had provided the epilogue.

John Philip Kemble, seduced by Godwin's flattery and insistence, had finally been prevailed upon to put it on the stage. Kemble had made up his mind that all the good tragedies that could be written had been written, and had not his objections been overruled, the tragedy "Antonio" would never have been produced, and one of Lamb's most delightful essays, in consequence, never written.

With the usual preliminaries, and after much correspondence and discussion, the night of the play came. It was produced at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane—what a ring it has! Lamb was there in a box next to the author, who was cheerful and confident.

It is a pity to mutilate Lamb's account of it, but it is too long to quote except in fragments: "The first act swept by solemn and silent . . . applause would have been impertinent, the interest would warm in the next act. . . . The second act rose a little in interest, the audience became complacently attentive. . . . The third act brought the scene which was to warm the piece progressively to the final flaming forth of the catastrophe, but the interest stood stone still. . . . It was Christmas time and the atmosphere furnished some pretext for asthmatic affections. Someone began to cough, his neighbors sympathized with him, till it be-

came an epidemic; but when from being artificial in the pit the cough got naturalized on the stage, and Antonio himself seemed more intent upon relieving his own lungs than the distress of the author, then Godwin 'first knew fear,' and intimated that had he been aware that Mr. Kemble labored under a cold the performance might possibly have been postponed. In vain did the plot thicken. The procession of verbiage stalked on, the audience paid no attention whatever to it, the actors became smaller and smaller, the stage receded, the audience was going to sleep, when suddenly Antonio whips out a dagger and stabs his sister to the heart. The effect was as if a murder had been committed in cold blood with the audience betrayed into being accomplices. The whole house rose in clamorous indignation—they would have torn the unfortunate author to pieces if they could have got him." The play was hopelessly and forever damned, and the epilogue went down in the crash.

Godwin bore his defeat with philosophic calm. He appealed to friends for financial assistance and to posterity for applause. But it was really a serious matter. He was on the verge of ruin, and now did what many another man has done when financial difficulties crowd thick and fast—he married again.

A certain Mrs. Clairmont fell in love with Godwin even before she had spoken to him. She was a fat, unattractive widow and apparently did all the courting. She took lodgings close by Godwin's, and introduced herself, "Is it possible that I behold the immortal Godwin"? This is flattery fed with a knife. When a

widow makes up her mind to marry, one of two things must be done, and quickly—her victim must run or submit. Godwin was unable to run and a marriage was the result. Like his first wedding it was for a time kept a profound secret.

An idea of Godwin and his wife at this period is to be had from Lamb's letters. He refers constantly to Godwin as the Professor, and to his wife as the Professor's Rib, whom he says "has turned out to be a damned disagreeable woman, so much so as to drive Godwin's old cronies," among whom was Lamb, "from his house."

It was a difficult household. Mrs. Godwin had two children by her first husband, a daughter whose right name was Mary Jane, but who called herself Claire. She lived to become the mistress of Lord Byron and the mother of his daughter Allegra. There was also a son who was raised a pet and grew up to be a nuisance. Godwin's immediate contribution to the establishment was the illegitimate daughter of his first wife, who claimed Imlay for her father, and his own daughter Mary, whose mother had died in giving her birth. In due course there was born another son, christened William, after his father.

Something had to be done, and promptly. Godwin began a book on "Chaucer," of whose life we know almost as little as of Shakespeare's. In dealing with Chaucer, Godwin introduced a method which subsequent writers have followed. Actual material being scanty they fill out the picture by supposing what he might have done and seen and thought. Godwin filled

two volumes quarto with musings about the fourteenth century and called it a "Life of Chaucer."

Mrs. Godwin, who was a "managing woman," had more confidence in trade than in literature. She opened a bookshop in Hanway Street under the name of Thomas Hodgkins, the manager, subsequently in Skinner Street, under her own name, M. J. Godwin. From this shop there issued children's books, the prettiest and wisest for "a penny plain and tuppence colored," and more. "The Children's Book Seller," as he called himself, was presently successful, and parents presented his little volumes to their children without suspecting that the lessons of piety and goodness which charmed away selfishness were published, revised and sometimes written by a philosopher whom they would scarcely venture to name. It was Godwin who suggested to Charles Lamb and his sister that the "Tales from Shakespeare" be written. Godwin's own contributions were written under the name of Baldwin. Lamb writes, "Hazlitt has written some things and a grammar for Godwin, but the grey mare is the better horse. I do not allude to Mrs. Godwin, but to the word grammar which comes near grey mare, if you observe." It would certainly surprise Godwin could he know that while his own "works" are forgotten, some of the little publications issued by the "Juvenile Library," 41 Skinner Street, Snow Hill, are worth their weight in gold.

The years passed on. Godwin lived more or less in constant terror of his wife, of whom Lamb writes, "Mrs. Godwin grows every day in disfavor with God and man. I will be buried with this inscription over

me: 'Here lies Charles Lamb, the woman hater, I mean that hated one woman. For the rest, God bless 'em, and when He makes any more, make 'em prettier.'"

As he grew older Godwin moderated his views of men somewhat so that "he ceased to be disrespectful to anyone but his Maker," and he once so far forgot himself as to say "God bless you" to a friend, but quickly added "to use a vulgar expression." He remained, however, always prepared to sacrifice a friend for a principle. He seemed to feel that truth had taken up its abode in him and that any question which he had submitted to the final judgment of his own breast had been passed upon, finally and forever.

This search for truth has a great fascination for a certain type of mind. It does not appear dangerous. All one has to do is to thrust his feet in slippers and muse, but it has probably caused as much misery as the search for the pole. The pole has now been discovered and can be dismissed, but the search for truth continues. It will always continue for the reason that its location is always changing. Every generation looks for it in a new place.

One night Lamb, dropping in on Godwin, found him discussing with Coleridge his favorite problem, "Man as he is and man as he ought to be." The subject seemed interminable. "Hot water and its better adjuncts" had been entirely overlooked. Finally Lamb stammered out, "Give me man as he ought not to be and something to drink." It must have been on one of these evenings that Godwin remarked "that he won-

dered why more people did not write like Shakespeare," to which Lamb replied "that he could—if he had the mind to."

The older generation was passing away. Long before he died Godwin was referred to as though he were a forgotten classic, but there was to be a revival of interest in him due entirely to the poet Shelley. The mere mention of Shelley's name produced an explosion. He had been expelled from Oxford for atheism. Reading revolutionary books, as well as writing them, he had come across "Political Justice" and was anxious to meet the author.

He sought him out, eventually made the acquaintance of his daughter Mary, by this time a beautiful and interesting girl of seventeen years, and in due course eloped with her, deserting his wife Harriet. Where was Godwin's philosophy now, well may we ask. At no time in his long life was Godwin so ridiculous as in his relations with Shelley.

In their flight, Shelley and Mary had taken with them Claire, Mrs. Godwin's daughter, who made after the runaways post-haste and overtook them in Calais, her arrival creating consternation in the camp of the fugitives, but they all declined to return. In such scorn was Shelley generally held that the rumor that he had bought both Godwin's daughter and step-daughter for a sum in hand paid created no amazement, the pity, rather than the possibility of it, being most discussed.

Financial affairs, too, in Skinner Street were going badly. From the record of notes given and protested

at maturity one might have supposed that Godwin was in active business in a time of panic.

"Don't ask me whether I won't take none or whether I will, but leave the bottle on the chimleypiece and let me put my lips to it when I am so disposed." Such was the immortal Mrs. Gamp's attitude toward gin. Godwin's last manner in money matters was much the same—money he would take from anyone and in any way when he must, but like Mrs. Gamp he was "disposed" to take it indirectly.

Indignant with Shelley, whose views on marriage were largely of his teaching, Godwin refused to hold any communication with him except such as would advance his (Godwin's) fortunes at Shelley's expense. Their transactions were to be of a strictly business character (business with Shelley!). We find Godwin writing him and returning a check for a thousand pounds because it was drawn to his order. How sure he must have been of it! "I return your cheque because no consideration can induce me to utter a cheque drawn by you and containing my name. To what purpose make a disclosure of this kind to your banker? I hope you will send a duplicate of it by the post which will reach me on Saturday morning. You may make it payable to Joseph Hume or James Martin or any other name in the whole directory," and then Godwin would forge the name of "Joseph Hume or James Martin or any other name in the whole directory," guarantee the signature by his own endorsement and the business transaction would be complete. Pretty high finance this, for a philosopher.

Not until after the death of Harriet, when Shelley's connection with Mary was promptly legalized, would Godwin consent to receive them. He then expressed his great satisfaction and wrote to his brother in the country that his daughter had married the eldest son of a wealthy baronet.

If this world affords true happiness it is to be found in a home where love and confidence increase with years, where the necessities of life come without severe strain, where luxuries enter only after their cost has been carefully considered. We are told that wealth is a test of character—few of us have to submit to it. Poverty is the more usual test. It is difficult to be very poor and maintain one's self-respect—Godwin found it impossible.

He, whose wish it had been to avoid domestic entanglements and who wanted his gratification and happiness studied habitually, was living in a storm center of poverty, misery and tragedy. Claire was known to have had a baby by Lord Byron, who had deserted her; Harriet Shelley had drowned herself in the Serpentine; Fanny Godwin, his step-daughter, took poison at Bristol. The philosopher, almost overcome, sought to conceal his troubles with a lie. To one of his correspondents he refers to Fanny's having been attacked in Wales with an inflammatory fever "which carried her off."

Meantime, the sufferings of others he bore with splendid fortitude. In a very brief letter to Mary Shelley, answering hers in which she told him of the death of her child, he said, "You should recollect that



it is only persons of a very ordinary sort and of a pusillanimous disposition that sink long under a calamity of this nature," but he covered folio sheets in his complainings to her, counting on her sensitive heart and Shelley's good nature for sympathy and relief.

With the death of Shelley, Godwin's affairs became desperate. Taking advantage of some defect in the title of the owner of the property which he had leased, he declined for some time to pay any rent, meantime carrying on a costly and vexatious lawsuit. Curiously enough, in the end, justice triumphed. Godwin was obliged to pay two years' arrears of rent and the costs of litigation. Of course, he looked upon this as an extreme hardship, as another indication of the iniquity of the law. But he was now an old man, very little happiness had broken in upon him and his friends took pity on him. Godwin was most ingenious in stimulating them to efforts on his behalf. A subscription was started under his direction. He probably felt that he knew best how to vary his appeals and make them effective. So much craft one would not have suspected in the old beggar.

One thing he always was—industrious. He finished a wretched novel and at once began a "History of the Commonwealth." He finished "The Lives of the Necromancers" and promptly began a novel, but with all his writings he has not left one single phrase with which his name can be associated, nor a single thought worth thinking.

It is almost superfluous to say that he had no sense of humor. With his head in the clouds and his feet in his

slippers he mused along. Hazlitt tells a capital story of him. He was writing a "Life of Chatham," and applied to his acquaintances to furnish him with anecdotes. Amongst others, a Mr. Fawcett told him of a striking passage in a speech by Lord Chatham on General Warrants, at the delivery of which he (Mr. Fawcett) had been present. "Every man's house has been called his castle. And why is it called his castle? Is it because it is defended by a wall, because it is surrounded with a moat? No, it may be nothing more than a straw-built shed. It may be open to all the elements; the wind may enter it, the rain may enter—but the king cannot enter." Fawcett thought that the point was clear enough; but when he came to read the printed volume, he found it thus: "Every man's house is his castle. And why is it called so? Is it because it is defended by a wall, because it is surrounded with a moat? No, it may be nothing more than a straw-built shed. It may be exposed to all the elements; the rain may enter into it, *all the winds of heaven may whistle around it, but the king cannot, etc.*"

Things were going from bad to worse. Most of his friends were dead or estranged from him. He had made a sad mess of his life and he was very old. Finally an appeal on his behalf was made to the government, to the government against which he had written and talked so much. It took pity on him. Lord Grey conferred on him the post of Yeoman Usher of the Exchequer, whatever that may be, with a residence in New Palace Yard. The office was a sinecure, "the duties performed by menials." For this exquisite

phrase I am indebted to his biographer. It seems to suggest that a "menial" is one who does his duty. Almost immediately, however, a reformed Parliament abolished the office, and Godwin seemed again in danger, but men of all creeds were now disposed to look kindly on the old man. He was assured of his position for life, and writing to the last, in 1836 he died, at the age of eighty, and was buried by the side of Mary Wollstonecraft in St. Pancras Churchyard.

If there is to be profit as well as pleasure in the study of biography, what lesson can be learned from such a life?

Many years before he died Godwin had written a little essay on "Sepulchres." It was a proposal for erecting some memorial to the dead on the spot where their remains were interred. Were one asked to suggest a suitable inscription for Godwin's tomb it might be

HOW NOT TO DO IT.

In the ever delightful "Angler," speaking of the operation of baiting a hook with a live frog, Walton finally completes his general instructions with the specific advice to "use him as though you loved him." In baiting my hook with a dead philosopher I have been unable to accomplish this; I do not love him, few did; he was a cold, hard, self-centered man who did good to none and harm to many. As a husband, father, friend, he was a complete failure. His search for truth was as unavailing as his search for "gratification and happiness." He is all but forgotten. It is his fate to be remembered chiefly as the husband of the first suffragette.

What has become of the

“Wonderful things he was going to do  
All complete in a minute or two”?

Where are now his novel philosophies and theories? To ask the question is to answer it.

Constant striving for the unobtainable frequently results in neglect of important matters close at hand—such things as bread and cheese and children are overlooked.

Some happiness comes from the successful effort to make both ends meet habitually and lap over occasionally. My philosophy of life may be called smug, but it can hardly be called ridiculous.

A. E. N.

“OAK KNOLL”  
November, 1913



100000  
N38804  
1913



